

## Holy Ground

I have tried to have a daily walk for years but during the 'lockdown' they have become something much deeper and more valuable than a quick dash to get the blood pumping. I've realised this week that I vary the pace during these walks. Yes, at some points, I do push myself physically: these walks are an essential tool in maintaining physical fitness. At other points, I slow, primarily to maintain footing on uneven terrain.

Once again I'm drawn to the woodland for this reflection! I enter the main woodland via a steep and rutted slope. It's necessary to slow down to maintain safety here but increasingly I'm aware that this gentler pace provides unexpected rewards. This slower, more sauntering walk, means I notice tiny intricate details of nature. These wonders of springtime, continue to refresh and uplift many of us during these challenging times. It was with delight that I recently learned that our word 'saunter' is derived from the French phrase *a la sainte terre*, 'to the holy ground'!

The idea of 'holy ground' interests me greatly. Many of us sense holiness in our ancient parish churches, places where communities have gathered to say prayers and recite scripture for centuries. Equally, the indescribable uplift of a few moments of 'sauntering' in the spring countryside reminds me that holiness certainly isn't confined to a building.

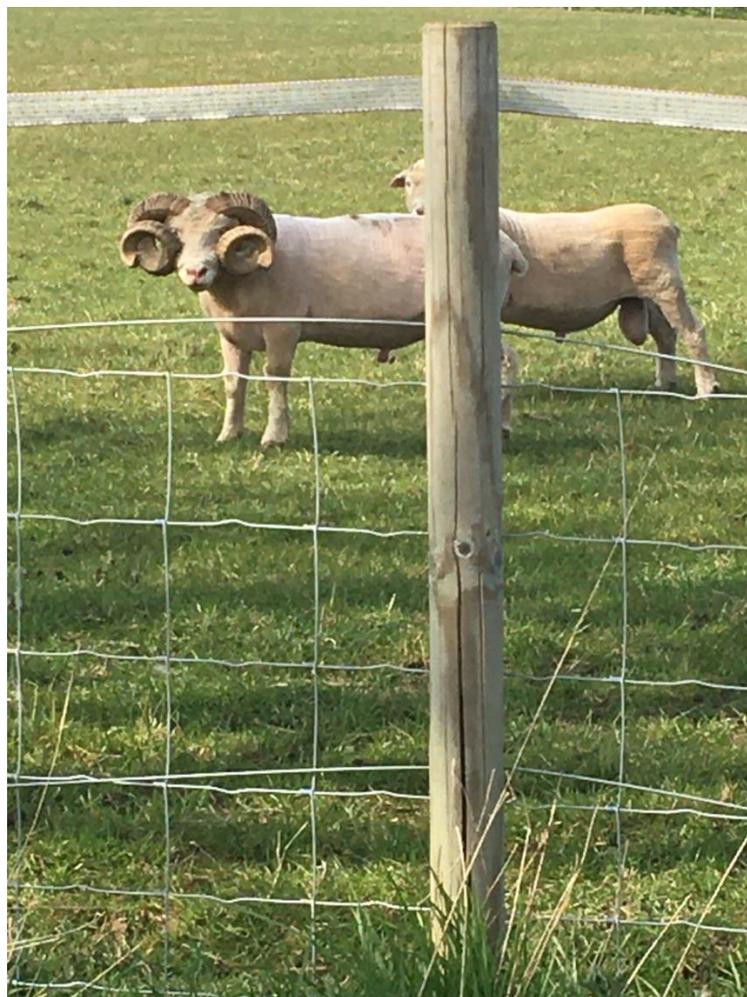
During the last few weeks, some of you have contacted me to share your own experiences of countryside walks during the 'lockdown'. It has been wonderful to hear your stories and see your photographs. Please keep them coming! I have realised that although we aren't physically walking together, there is perhaps a sense of a 'community' sharing an experience.

This year's bluebells have clearly brought delight to many of you. The scene below was photographed in Finchingfield.



For the last few years, I have been concerned about the impact of rural isolation and loneliness on well-being. I feared that the enforced isolation of the 'lockdown' would be the cause of considerable loneliness. It has been heartening to see the care and kindness that has prevailed to support everyone during these times. I've also sensed that the goal of this isolation, to reduce the transmission of this devastating virus, has brought a shared purpose. Perhaps this strong desire to protect each other has strengthened us all in our resolve to maintain this isolation for now. A sense of togetherness whilst we've been physically separated has been formed and maintained in creative ways. Surely this is the spirit that could bring a renewed sense of community when we can gather in person again.

In the meantime, I continue to give thanks for the holy ground we share wherever we walk. And I hope you enjoy the next photo as much as I did. I don't meet any sheep on my walks so I greatly appreciated receiving the picture of this Dorset ram (happily settled in Essex) proudly displaying his impressive horns!



*Revd Canon Janet Nicholls*